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# RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Written statement*/ submitted by Human Rights Advocates, Inc.,
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[8 March 2000]

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*/ This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Ways to reintegrate children being demobilized

1. An estimated 300,000 children under the age of eighteen in 36 countries in the world are being used as child soldiers. Many children join armed groups because of economic and social pressure or because they are looking for a shelter. Others are forcibly recruited, or abducted by armed groups. Both girls and boys are being used as child soldiers. This year the Working Group on a draft of a protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in Armed Conflict has come to a consensus that eighteen should be the minimum age for participation in armed conflict. But some problems remain.

2. Some children are still at risk of being recruited because their age can not be determined or proven. Most countries where children are recruited as soldiers already have legislation fixing the minimum recruitment age at 18 years old but younger children are frequently found eligible for military services based only on their older appearance. This is the case most particularly in areas where birth or age documentation are not readily available.[1] Systems for verifying ages must be implemented.

3. Even while governments recognize the existence of child soldiers and create provisions against new recruits, they might not create provisions to aid demobilization of existing child soldiers. The world community has observed that in peace agreements where there was no specific provision for the demobilization of children, childrens' special needs were unlikely to be taken into account.[2] Many former child soldiers did not have access to education, family reunification, or even food and shelter that they needed to successfully rejoin civilian society.[3]

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[1] United Nations, Press release HR/CRC/00/7 on Sierra Leone

[2] Grac'a Machel, expert appointed by the Secretary General for the study on the Impact of Armed Conflict of Children, A/51/306, paragraph 49

[3] Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, www.hrw.org/hrw/campaigns/crp/facts.htm

4. Forced to learn to kill instead of pursuing education, children lack the knowledge and skills needed to build their own futures and the futures of their communities. Because most of the time former child soldiers have nowhere to go, they are easy targets for child prostitution and child labor. Children involved in armed conflicts often need medical attention. Many suffer from physical and mental disabilities. The world community now needs to consider how to prepare to receive demobilized child soldiers. Following are some illustrations of these problems.

Child prostitution

5. Girls that were forced to serve as wives or servants to the combatants require measures to ensure that they are not driven into further sexual exploitation once they are to leave the army.[4] One example of children becoming victims of prostitution following demobilization, was the arrival of peace keeping forces in Mozambique: girls aged 12-18 years were recruited into prostitution by soldiers of the United Nations.[5]

Education

6. Numerous treaties guarantee the right to education. However, many countries do not have the educational infrastructure to allow former child soldiers access to education.

7. In Sierra Leone the majority of schools are destroyed and almost 70 percent of primary school pupils do not attend school.[6] In Angola only 50 percent of school-aged children are enrolled in classes, with a high drop out rate after the first grade.[7] In Georgia, the share of national income spent on education fell from 6 percent in 1990 to just over 1 percent in 1996.[8]

8. While most emergency education programs focus on primary education, secondary education should not be overlooked. The majority of former child soldiers are of the ages appropriate for secondary education. If there is no emergency secondary education available to this age group, children will be left no alternative but reenlistment.

9. For a former child soldier, education is more than a route to employment. It also helps to normalize life and to develop an identity separate from that of the soldier. It should be noted that special classes for former child soldiers may be required until they can progressively reintegrate into regular schooling.

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[4] Grac'a Machel, expert appointed by the Secretary General for the study on the Impact of Armed Conflict of Children, A/51/306, paragraph 97

[5] Ibid, paragraph 98

[6] United Nations Press Release, HR/CRC/00/7

[7] UNICEF information newsline, plea: protect Angola's children

[8] Information drawn from UNICEF Innocenti Research Center's MONEE Project, After the Fall, November 1999

Families

10. It is estimated that 2 to 5 percent of the refugee population in camps are unaccompanied children.[9] Efforts to reunify the child with his family should be one of the first priorities. It will enable the child to recover his sense of security and stability.

11. To locate the children's parents can be lengthy and difficult. In the interim, measures should include foster care to re-introduce children to a family structure and prevent children from reenlisting in armed forces.

12. Attention should be brought to internally displaced children. A lot of child soldiers have been 'internally displaced within their countries'. Sierra Leone's on- going war has resulted in the massive displacement of an estimated 690,000 children under 18 years of age.[10] While refugees benefit from the specific attention of a number of international organizations, those who are displaced internally receive less protection even though they tend to be at greater risk. While internally displaced children ought to be protected by their own state, they are trapped in conflict zones. They are often located in inaccessible and dangerous locations.

Health care

13. Girls that were forced to serve as wives or servants to the combatants, require HIV/AIDS screening. Unfortunately screening for AIDS is not always available. For example there is no comprehensive system in place for test screening for AIDS in Sierra Leone. This is alarming when one knows that each day 8,500 children and young people around the world are infected with HIV. An estimated 200,000 Africans, most of them women, died as a result of conflicts in
1998, while 2 million people were killed by AIDS.[11]

14. Many children are traumatized by their experiences as child soldiers. In Kenya, Kakuma camp provides shelter for other 11,000 Sudanese boys abducted from their families at a very young age by the Sudanese rebel force. They were sent through the mine fields. Many of them suffer from deep depression.[12] They require professional counseling.

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[9] Christiane Berthiaume, Alone in the World, article on Children and Families (95,1-1994) that can be found in unhcr.ch/issues/children)

[10] United Nation Press Release, HR/CRC/007, Committee on the Rights of the Child takes up report of Sierra Leone on Implementation of Children's Convention

[11] The State of the World's Children 2000, Press Summary, UNICEF

[12] Christiane Berthiaume, Alone in the World, article on Children and Families (95,1-1994) that can be found in unhcr.ch/issues/children

15. Millions of children are killed by armed conflict, but three times as many are seriously injured or permanently disabled by it. In Afghanistan alone, some 100,000 children have war-related disabilities, many of them caused by land mines. Only 3 percent in developing countries receive adequate rehabilitative care.[13] This lack of rehabilitative care is contrary to article 23 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which lays out clearly the responsibilities of State Parties for ensuring effective access of disabled children to education, health and rehabilitation services.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

16. Human Rights Advocates welcomes and encourages the implementation of the protocol on the draft to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children under 18 in armed conflicts.

17. Human Rights Advocates recommends that the mandate of the special representative on the impact on armed conflict on children should continue to look at the following issues when addressing the human rights of children who have been in war and are still at risk of rejoining the army:

- considering methods to verify the age of recruitment
- promoting alternatives to child prostitution such as social reintegration and free basic education
- giving children maximum possible access to education and especially to secondary education during and after conflict
- implementing programs for the psychological recovery and the rehabilitation of children
- tracing families of unaccompanied children and meanwhile providing foster care for children

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[13] Grac'a Machel, expert appointed by the Secretary General for the study on the Impact of Armed Conflict of Children, A/51/306, paragraph 145